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ABSTRACT

With the "Military Teens On The Move" (MTOM) Web site, the Office of Family Policy has implemented an innovative approach to providing relocation support for military families and children via the Internet. This paper briefly describes the design team's efforts to design, develop, and implement MTOM. The first section of the paper describes the process and results of an assessment of military youth needs and available resources. The second section describes MTOM's design, including its goals and objectives, structure, and content. The third section describes the current pilot test of the Web site, and the fourth section identifies "next steps" in implementing the Web site across the Department of Defense. The paper notes that by connecting military youth to a wide range of information resources already existing on the World Wide Web and to new resources tailored to meet the unique needs of military teens facing relocation, MTOM intends to help teens play a more proactive role in the relocation process, reconnect quickly to their new communities and positive peer groups, and develop and maintain a positive relationship with their parents and families. (Author/LPP)

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Military Teens On The Move:

An Internet Resource for Military Youth Facing Relocation

Mareena McKinley Wright, Rebecca Schaffer, Kathleen Coolbaugh, Gary Bowen, & Gina Wiley ■

Abstract

With the *Military Teens On The Move* (*MTOM*) Web site, the Office of Family Policy has implemented an innovative approach to providing relocation support for military families and children via the Internet. This paper briefly describes the design team's efforts to design, develop, and implement *MTOM*. The first section describes the process and results of an assessment of military youth needs and available resources. The second section describes *MTOM*'s design, including its goals and objectives, structure, and content. The third section describes the current pilot test of the Web site, and the fourth section identifies "next steps" in implementing the Web site across the Department of Defense. By connecting military youth to a wide range of information resources already existing on the World Wide Web and to new resources tailored to meet the unique needs of military teens facing relocation, *MTOM* intends to help teens play a more proactive role in the relocation process, reconnect quickly to their new communities and positive peer groups, and develop and maintain a positive relationship with their parents and families.

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Introduction

Research shows that frequent relocation deprives youth of the stable support systems they need to develop healthy attitudes and behaviors and, consequently, increases the risk that they will develop problem behaviors leading to juvenile delinquency and crime. The implications of this research are of particular interest to the military, because nearly 200,000 military children ages 6 to 11 and 223,000 military adolescents ages 12 to 18 move each year, which is equivalent to approximately four times the rate of their civilian counterparts (Pittman & Bowen, 1994). In fact, many military youth move five or more times before they reach adolescence. Without a coordinated effort to provide the support that these youth need to overcome the challenges posed by frequent relocation, military youth may develop problem behaviors that range from poor school performance to antisocial behavior to drug abuse and other delinquent activity.

The Department of Defense (DoD) and the military Services, through their worldwide network of Family Centers and Youth Programs, have long provided relocation support to military families. Relocation services, however, traditionally have focused on the military Service members and their spouses. Recognizing the need to provide relocation support not only to adults but also to military youth, DoD and the military Services recently have begun to develop and implement programs to assist military adolescents during family moves. While these programs are promising in concept, they have not yet been uniformly implemented within or across the military Services.

In an effort to bridge this service gap, the Office of Family Policy (OFP) of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, Personnel Support, Families, and Education—an agency dedicated to developing and implementing coordinated policies and programs to support military families and their children—established a design team of social service researchers and computer experts to

ED 425 001 ES 027 187

develop a system to support military youth facing relocation. Based on an assessment of military youth's relocation needs, available military resources, and existing youth-oriented Internet resources, the design team determined that developing a Web site containing a wide array of relocation-related resources for military youth should be the first step in developing an integrated support system. Thus, the design team developed *Military Teens On The Move* (*MTOM*), a Web site that provides military youth with information and resources about the relocation process, their new installations and communities, their new schools, and other youth-oriented topics, such as colleges, jobs, and family relations (URL: http://www.mtom.com).

This paper briefly describes the design team's efforts to design, develop, and implement *MTOM*. The first section describes the process and results of an assessment of military youth needs and available resources. The second section describes *MTOM*'s design, including its goals and objectives, structure, and content. The third section describes the current pilot test of the Web site, and the fourth section identifies "next steps" in implementing the Web site DoD-wide.

Military Youth Needs and Available Resources

To assist in the design and development of this relocation support system, the design team conducted the following data collection activities:

- Reviewed literature on the impact of relocation on adolescents.
- Analyzed the content of online, youth-oriented, and relocation-focused Internet resources.
- Discussed current activities and program initiatives with the military Services' Youth and Relocation Program managers.
- Interviewed installation-level relocation and Youth Program staff.
- Conducted focus group interviews with youth about relocation issues and their access to and use of computers.

Through these activities, the design team identified the needs and concerns of relocated military adolescents and assessed both the resources available to support a youth relocation assistance system and the feasibility of an automated outreach system.

Military Youth Needs

Recent research shows that in order to adapt successfully to a move, children must accomplish the sometimes daunting tasks of separating from old friends, making new friends, adjusting to a new school and community, and maintaining positive relationships with their parents. Adolescents in particular have difficulty accomplishing these tasks because:

- They invest much of themselves in their relationships with friends and find it increasingly difficult to separate from their peer groups. Adolescents' fragile self-esteem and sometimes insufficient self-confidence can impede their ability to make friends and integrate quickly and easily into a new school and community (Pinder, 1989).
- They are increasingly concerned about their academic performance and involvement in extracurricular activities. Changing schools, therefore, may cause anxiety about adapting to new or different academic standards, course offerings, and extracurricular programs (Walling, 1990).
- The relocation process forces them to depend on their parents for continuity and support at a time when developmentally they are working on becoming independent from their parents. A move at this time may exacerbate normal tensions between adolescents and their parents, who often provide their teens little notification or information about an impending move. Parents may also be preoccupied with their own concerns about the move (Godwin, 1990; Walling, 1990).

Youth who experience relocation-related problems are more likely to feel isolated and angry during the relocation process. Without help in overcoming these problems, they may develop negative attitudes and problem behaviors (Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Catalano & Hawkins, 1995).

Although frequent relocations can place military teens at greater risk for problem behavior, the majority do not suffer from extended social isolation or become juvenile offenders. Most military adolescents successfully deal with the social disruptions and anxiety caused by moving and reintegrate into their new schools and communities. Factors that help mitigate the negative effects of relocation include:

- . Strong positive relationships between relocated adolescents and their families (Pittman & Bowen, 1994; Walling, 1990)
- Access to information about their new location, the relocation process, and adolescent life in general (Pittman & Bowen, 1994)
- Strong individual coping skills, personal confidence, and positive attitudes (Catalano & Hawkins, 1995).

Youth who benefit from these internal and external resources before, during, and after a family move often develop positive personality traits, such as independence and resilience, as a result of the relocation process.

Thus, the challenge facing the design team was to develop a cost-effective information and outreach system designed to promote positive internal resources (e.g., self-confidence, resilience, communication skills) and to provide the teens with access to a wide range of external resources (e.g., information about their new installation, school, and community) that would foster positive adaptation and empower youth to become active participants in the relocation process.

Available Resources

In order to identify the resources available to support the development of this information and outreach system, the design team interviewed a number of program stakeholders. These interviews revealed that the Department of Defense and the military Services provide a wide range of relocation support services to military families. Traditionally, however, these services have focused on the adult family member. Recognizing the need to provide relocation support not only to Service members and spouses but also to military youth, DoD and the military Services recently have begun to develop and implement programs to assist military adolescents during family moves. For example, the four military Services are at various stages of developing a Youth Sponsorship Program designed to match youth facing relocation with their peers at the new installations who are responsible for welcoming the youth to the installation.

Despite the increased awareness about the importance of providing youth relocation services, resource constraints have limited the Youth and Relocation Programs' ability to develop and staff new programs or services. Thus, existing resources would have to be used to develop creative alternatives to support military youth facing relocation.

The Internet Solution

Given that military teens who are relocating are in greatest need of information and outreach services and that neither DoD nor the Services have the resources needed to develop and staff new outreach programs, OFP and the design team began exploring Internet technologies to augment adolescent relocation support activities DoD-wide.

To get a better sense of whether military teens might use an Internet Web site to obtain relocation-related resources, the design team met with military teens and Relocation and Youth Program managers and staff. Based on these discussions, the design team drew the following conclusions:

- Many military teens have both access to computers (especially at home and in schools) and experience using the Internet. They have few, if any, concerns about using computers or learning new technology.
- Youth access to computers and the Internet on military installations (i.e., at Youth Centers, libraries, and other public access locations) varies by military Service and by installation within each Service.
- The Services (particularly the Army and Navy) already have begun to provide computer labs with Internet access for military youth.
- Both military youth and program staff reacted positively to the concept of an Internet Web site as a potential educational/support resource for youth, parents, and program staff.
- The Internet has a wide range of resources on relocation and other topics of interest to teens, but locating pertinent Web sites can be a difficult and often haphazard process for them.

The results of these discussions suggested that existing technology and increasing computer availability on military installations and in military households would make an Internet Web site an ideal vehicle for providing teens, parents, and program staff with information about relocation and other topics. Thus, OFP gave the design team the go ahead to design and develop the Web site now known as *Military Teens On The Move*.

The Web Site Design

As illustrated by the conceptual model in Figure 1, the Web site is designed to help military youth overcome the problems associated with relocation, including alienation from peers, decreased school involvement and performance, negative parent–child relationships, and negative self-concepts. To this end, the Web site provides information and resources that will help youth achieve the following relocation objectives:

- Stay connected with friends and family. *MTOM* provides chat rooms and bulletin boards that youth facing relocation can use to keep in touch with friends and family at their old installations and to meet new friends *before* arriving at the new installation. These features provide quick, no-cost means to stay connected.
- Integrate quickly into the new school and community. *MTOM* teaches youth how to access installation and school home pages and how to contact teachers and counselors at the new school using the Web site's many hypertext links and e-mail. (Hypertext links enable the user to click on designated spots on the screen to move from one Web page to another without typing in a new Internet address. They allow the Web site author to create pathways for users to follow in their search for information.) *MTOM* also provides easy access to homework assistance Web sites.
- Maintain and enhance the parent–teen relationship. *MTOM* provides information about the effects of relocation on the entire family (e.g., how younger siblings may react to a move) and suggests strategies for coping with family moving strains. It also provides tips and guidelines for parents and fun relocation-oriented activities for younger siblings.
- Make informed decisions about their own behaviors and actions. *MTOM* provides a variety of tips and guidelines on relocation-related topics ranging from moving with pets to coping with stress, which are designed to help youth become active participants in the relocation process. *MTOM* also provides access to a wide range of youth-oriented Web sites that cover mental health, education, career, and other general and specific topics of interest to teenagers.

By accomplishing these objectives, youth facing relocation will increase or improve their involvement with positive peer groups, relationships with their parents, attachments to the community, prosocial behaviors, educational achievement, and positive personality traits (e.g., high self-esteem, resilience, independence). Ultimately, they will decrease their chances of developing problem behaviors.

The Web site's success in achieving these goals and objectives depends on its ability to attract and maintain the interest of teen users. Consequently, the design team has developed a user-friendly, appealing structure that provides the teen user with easy, targeted access to information and resources that address prevalent youth needs.

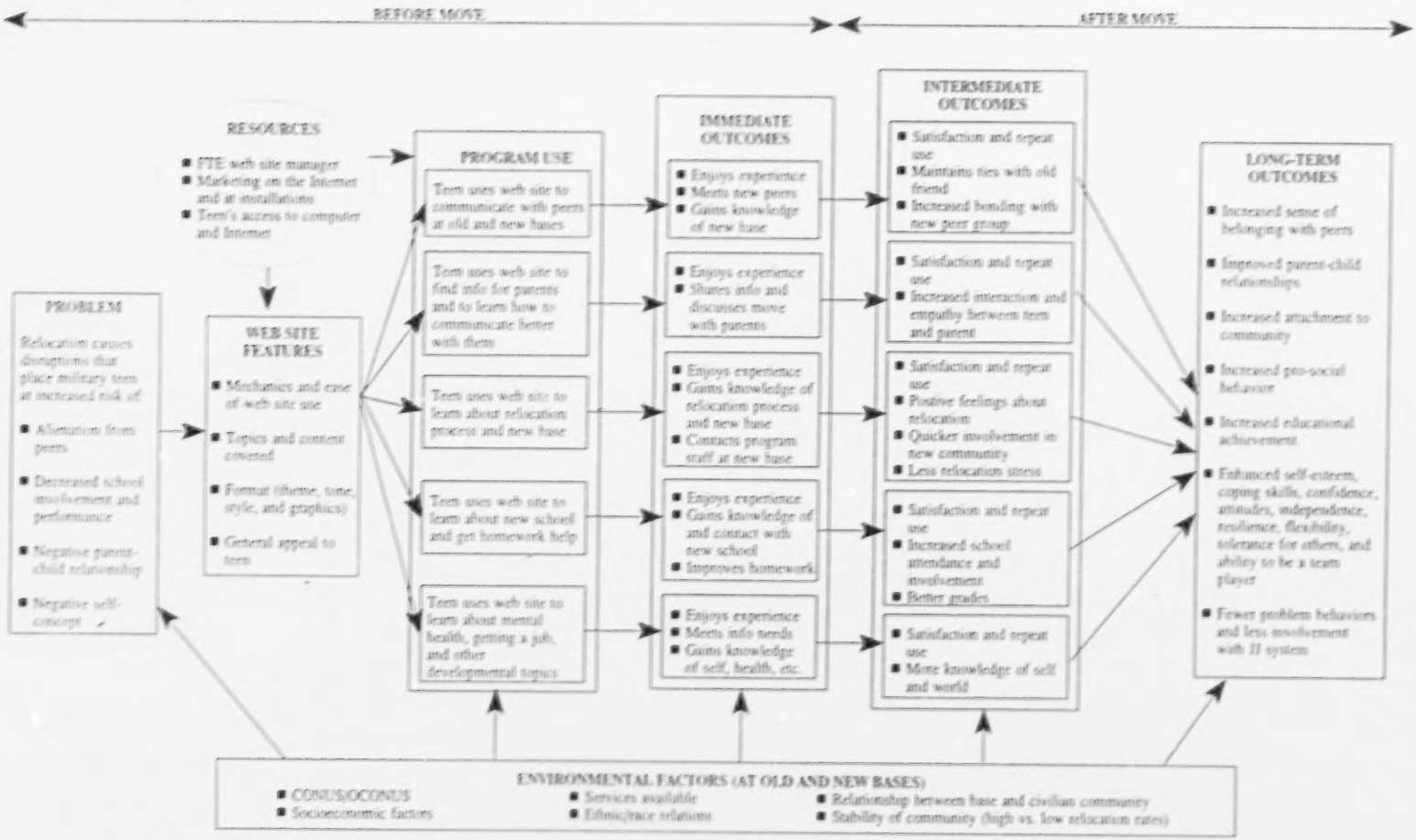
Structure, Theme, and Content

Military Teens On The Move contains the following main topic areas:

- Making the Move—contains relocation-related information and resources such as "top ten" lists of things to do before the move.
- Schools—contains education-related information and resources such as links to college home pages and online homework assistance networks.
- Installations—contains links to installation home page directories for each of the four military Services.
- Youth Sponsorship—contains information on DoD's Youth Sponsorship Program.
- Rules of the Road—contains information on Internet use and safety.
- News You Can Use—contains general youth-oriented information and resources ranging from personality tests to information on obtaining a driver's license to a wide range of health-related topics.

The matrix in Table 1 presents a complete list of main topic and subtopic Web pages.

Just as each main topic page contains multiple hypertext links to multiple subtopic pages, each subtopic page contains links to multiple relevant Web pages. Some of these pages were created specifically for this Web site, while others are located at other Web sites that target military or civilian teenagers. By using numerous hypertext links, *MTOM* is able to provide targeted access to


BEFORE MOVE
AFTER MOVE
RESOURCES
PTE web site manager
Marketing on the Internet and at installations
Teen's access to computer and Internet
PROBLEM
Relocation causes disruptions that place military teen at increased risk of:
Alienation from peers
Decreased school involvement and performance
Negative parent-child relationship
Negative self-concept
WEB SITE FEATURES
Mechanics and ease of web site use
Topics and content covered
Format (theme, tone, style, and graphics)
General appeal to teen
PROGRAM USE
Teen uses web site to communicate with peers at old and new bases
Teen uses web site to find info for parents and to learn how to communicate better with them
Teen uses web site to learn about relocation process and new base
Teen uses web site to learn about new school and get homework help
Teen uses web site to learn about mental health, getting a job, and other developmental topics
IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES
Enjoys experience
Meets new peers
Gains knowledge of new base
Enjoys experience
Shares info and discusses move with parents
Enjoys experience
Gains knowledge of relocation process and new base
Contacts program staff at new base
Enjoys experience
Gains knowledge of and contact with new school
Improves homework
Enjoys experience
Meets info needs
Gains knowledge of self, health, etc.
INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES
Satisfaction and repeat use
Maintains ties with old friend
Increased bonding with new peer group
Satisfaction and repeat use
Increased interaction and empathy between teen and parent
Satisfaction and repeat use
Positive feelings about relocation
Quicker involvement in new community
Less relocation stress
Satisfaction and repeat use
Increased school attendance and involvement
Better grades
Satisfaction and repeat use
More knowledge of self and world
LONG-TERM OUTCOMES
Increased sense of belonging with peers
Improved parent-child relationships
Increased attachment to community
Increased pro-social behavior
Increased educational achievement
Enhanced self-esteem, coping skills, confidence, attitudes, independence, resilience, flexibility, tolerance for others, and ability to be a team player
Fewer problem behaviors and less involvement with JJ system
ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS (AT OLD AND NEW BASES)
CONUS/OCONUS
Socioeconomic factors
Services available
Ethnic/race relations
Relationship between base and civilian community
Stability of community (high vs. low relocation rates)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Figure 1. Conceptual model for the implementation and outcomes of Military Teens On The Move.

the Internet's vast supply of youth-oriented information and resources. For example, *MTOM*'s "School Stuff" subtopic page (located under the "Making the Move" main topic page) contains links to other relevant pages within *MTOM* (e.g., "Tips for Changing Schools," chat rooms) and links to other Web sites, such as the Department of Defense Education Activity's Web site and several civilian school directories. These Web sites in turn link to hundreds of individual military and civilian school home pages and other school-related Web sites.

Table 1

***Military Teens On The Move* Main Topics and Subtopics**

Main Topic	Subtopics
Making the Move (Relocation)	Meeting New Friends and Staying in Touch with Old Friends Enhancing Family Relations Moving with Pets Packing and Moving Possessions Learning about New Installations School Stuff: Learning about New Schools Dealing with Stress and Other Emotions
Schools	Learning about New Schools Changing Schools Thinking and Learning about Colleges and Universities Accessing Homework and Research Assistance
Installations	Learning about Army Installations Learning about Navy Installations Learning about Air Force Installations Learning about Marine Corps Installations
Youth Sponsorship	About Youth Sponsorship Getting a Sponsor Becoming a Sponsor Activating an Installation Youth Sponsorship Program Activity Planning Guidelines Suggestions for Youth Sponsorship Activities
Rules of the Road (Internet Use and Safety)	Using the Internet "Surfing" Safety Learning "Netiquette" (Guidelines for appropriate Web user conduct)
News You Can Use (Other Adolescent Issues/Information)	Enhancing Mental Health Accessing Homework Assistance Getting a Driver's License Learning about Health-related Issues (e.g., Substance Abuse/Abuse, HIV) Going to College Planning a Career Learning about School Safety Dealing with Deployment Dealing with Relationships Getting Involved in Volunteerism

All of the pages created for *MTOM* and all of the "outside" pages that are linked to *MTOM* contain information that military teens have requested during focus group interviews with the design team and formal youth needs assessments conducted by DoD and the military Services. The information is presented in an upbeat, friendly style at a reading level that is accessible to the majority of adolescents. Moreover, *MTOM* encourages repeat use (beyond the relocation period) by providing information on a wide range of general adolescent concerns, such as health-related issues, career planning, homework assistance, and college planning. *MTOM* also provides helpful instructions on "surfing" the Internet and guidelines for Internet safety and user conduct.

Consistent with the Web site's emphasis on relocation support, *MTOM*'s text and graphics employ a "travel" theme. For example, the introductory page

of the Web site contains a large graphic of a highway that stretches to the horizon; the menu page presents the six main topic pages as destinations on a subway map; and the section addressing Internet use and safety is titled "Rules of the Road." In addition to providing an appealing presentation style, the unifying theme and consistent layout of *MTOM*'s topic, subtopic, and informational pages signal to users when they are on an *MTOM* page, as opposed to a page at another Web site linked to *MTOM*. This feature is important because outside pages often contain commands, such as "Home," that will send the user to other sections of that Web site instead of returning them to *MTOM*.

In addition to the topic, subtopic, and informational pages, *MTOM* also contains chat rooms, bulletin boards, an index, a feedback survey, and a comment option. Based on feedback from teen users, input from program staff, and developments in the field, additional features may be added to facilitate use of the Web site and to increase its overall appeal to teen users.

The Pilot Test

The design team is currently conducting a pilot test of *MTOM* to gather feedback on the Web site's design and utility and to assess the extent to which the Web site meets the project's overall youth relocation support objectives. This pilot test includes two components: automated Web site monitoring and a series of installation site visits.

Automated Monitoring System

The automated monitoring system provides information about the number of users that access *MTOM*, the amount of time they spend on the Web site, the location of the computers used to access the Web site, and the pages of *MTOM* most often accessed by users. This information is obtained from automated access logs of *MTOM* use, which are compiled by the server on which *MTOM* resides. In addition, new *MTOM* users are invited to complete a short demographic profile when they enter the Web site. *MTOM* also has an online feedback survey, which invites users to give their impressions of the Web site, as well as basic demographic information. Finally, *MTOM* has a general "comments" feature that allows users to send a message directly to the webmaster. These features are being used to assess the extent to which the Web site is used and enjoyed by the targeted audience.

Automated Web site monitoring reveals that between August 5, 1997, and October 1, 1997, *MTOM* was visited 698 times (or had 698 "hits"). Web site use logs also indicate that the most frequently visited sections of *MTOM* include "Schools," "News You Can Use," and "Youth Sponsorship." Thus far, too few new user profiles, feedback surveys, and comments have been collected to report any meaningful findings about the utility and appeal of the Web site.

Installation Site Visits

While the automated monitoring system provides basic information about *MTOM* users, it provides only limited insight into *how* adolescents use the Web site, whether they experience any difficulties accessing or using the site, and whether the information provided is helpful to them. To gather this type of data, the design team has conducted site visits to multiple installations to demonstrate the Web site, observe teens using the Web site, and interview and survey teens and installation-level youth and relocation program staff following the Web site demonstrations.

In general, response to *MTOM* has been overwhelmingly positive. A sampling of teen comments includes:

- "I am very Internet literate and am very impressed."
- "It looks like a very helpful thing to teens...in the military. I think it's a really good program!"
- "It was very well planned and is easy to find what you're looking for."
- "It was cool. Very informative."
- "Has a lot of good information on all the things on the bases to help kids and teens."
- "Gives us an easy way to communicate with friends that we've left behind."
- "It links military teens together, makes moves easier."
- "I like the set-up and the information. I only wish it were made sooner."

Teen users also suggested improvements to the Web site, such as using more exciting graphics and special effects, adding other topics or subtopics,

and involving military teens in the maintenance and further development of *MTOM*. A majority of the teen respondents indicated that they would be interested in helping to update and maintain the Web site in the future.

The Youth and Relocation Program staff were also excited about *MTOM*. A sampling of adult comments includes:

- "A lot of very good information which will help all Youth Centers in the [Services]."
- "It's a great index for youth."
- "Can't wait to check it out at home."
- "Fantastic. It's great that the students can have access to this information."

Adult users also suggested involving teens in *MTOM* maintenance. Youth Center staff expressed concerns about obtaining Internet access and desired additional information about developing installation-level Youth Program Web sites.

Next Steps

To ensure that the Web site reaches its full potential as a sustainable relocation assistance and outreach program, OFP must complete the following steps:

- Develop a marketing plan for *MTOM*.
- Establish a method to update and maintain the Web site.
- Develop *MTOM*'s potential as a program development tool.

The remainder of this section describes each of these steps in more detail.

Develop a Marketing Plan for MTOM

Several marketing tools already have been developed to generate interest in the Web site at installations involved in the pilot test. The design team developed a multi-color glossy bookmark displaying *MTOM*'s logo, URL, and a brief description of the Web site. The team also designed T-shirts displaying the metro map graphic used on the *MTOM* menu page, a banner that states "Ask me about *Military Teens On The Move*," and the Web site's URL. Both items have been well received by both teens and adults at the installations included in the pilot test. In the future, the bookmarks could be included in installation welcome packets or handed out at installation Family Centers, Youth Centers, libraries, schools, and computer labs to promote use of *MTOM* by military youth. The T-shirts could be sold at program fund raisers or used as rewards or door prizes for various youth-oriented activities.

The design team is currently developing a marketing plan to promote DoD-wide use of *MTOM* after the pilot test. Under this plan, marketing efforts will include indexing *MTOM* in major search engines (e.g., Yahoo!ligans, Lycos), inviting related Web sites (e.g., Adolescence Directory On-Line) to link to *MTOM*, nominating *MTOM* for Internet awards, and advertising the Web site in military- and family-related media. These multiple marketing efforts will ensure that *MTOM* gains high visibility in the military community—especially among military youth.

Establish a Method to Update and Maintain the Web Site

Ongoing maintenance will be required to keep the Web site up to date. Typically, a designated "webmaster" monitors use of the Web site and its various pages; responds to e-mail concerning the Web site; compiles feedback and survey data collected on various pages of the Web site; and updates the Web site's text, graphics, and hypertext links. Based on teen responses to the pilot test, it is clear that they desire a role in this process. OFP and the design team must establish Web site maintenance requirements and guidelines before the Web site can be marketed DoD-wide.

Develop MTOM's Potential as a Program Development Tool

MTOM has the potential to support Youth and Relocation Programs at both headquarters and installation levels by providing program staff with the following resources:

- Outreach tool. *MTOM*'s hypertext links to local program resources and activities could provide a cost-effective means of augmenting the existing human service delivery system for youth on military installations.
- Needs assessment tool. *MTOM*'s automated monitoring capability could be used to assess latent demand for programs and identify needs for future program development.
- Program development tool. *MTOM* could support installation-level Youth Sponsorship Programs by assisting teen participants in building and maintaining their installations' Youth

Sponsorship Web pages. Web site related activities could serve as either the foundation for an installation's sponsorship program or an adjunct to an existing program.

In addition to these state-of-the-art electronic tools, *MTOM* also could provide an inexpensive online forum for military adolescents to express their needs and interests directly to Youth and Relocation Program staff at DoD, Military Department Headquarters, and installations via the Web site bulletin board and chat room.

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